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ABSTRACT

Results of a nationwide survey that examined requirements of university administrator education programs for developing competence in the areas of special education and special education law are presented in this paper. Surveys mailed to department chairs at 123 universities elicited 66 responses, a 54 percent response rate. Findings indicate that universities are confused about endorsement requirements and do not adequately prepare administrators to confront special education issues. In light of tne Regular Education Initiative, a movement to integrate regular and special education that would hold principals accountable for special education programs, it is important that administrators comprehend the regulatory requirements and pertinent case law. Three figures are included. (LMI)

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A Nationwide Survey of School Administrator Training Program Provisions and Awareness of Certification Requirements for Administrator Competency in Special Education and Special Education Law

Nationwide, school administrators are keenly aware of school reform movements and the resultant efforts to restructure education. Consequently, many school administrators are actively involved in educational reform; assuming the role of instructional leader and experimenting with concepts such as school-based decision making. In some states, reform initiatives have also included experimentation toward integration of regular and special education into a unified system of delivery, which has become known as the Regular Education Initiative (REI). Over a five year period beginning in 1985, the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) funded a series of grants for the purpose of investigating instructional, organizational, and administrative issues related to educating students with disabilities in the regular classroom environment. As a result, many states and local school districts are actively involved in these experimental research projects.

Madeline Will, former Assistant Secretary for Special Education at the U.S. Department of Education in a report entitled, Educating Students with Learning Problems: A Shared Responsibility (1986), cautions that even though funding and compliance waivers may be

granted to experiment with REI recommendations, the legal requirements and parent/student rights established by P.L. 94-142 would not be altered. In order to accomplish a partnership between regular and special education, one of Will's recommendations is that principals be empowered to control all programs and resources at the building level. As a consequence, regular school administrators must possess a knowledge of special education law to implement the requirements of P.L. 94-142; however, research has established that principals' knowledge of special education law needs improvement (Cline, 1981; Olson, 1982; Hirth & Valesky, 1989). Therefore, if principals and other administrators are having difficulty with special education under the dual system, we must question whether they are prepared for a partnership where they would assume more responsibility and become more accountable for special education.

In response to this trend toward greater accountability for special education, state certification requirements and university preparation programs for school administrators must ensure that school administrators are ready to face the challenges posed by this educational reform effort. Valesky & Hirth (in press) through a survey of state directors of special education examined state requirements for certification endorsements of school administrators to determine whether they require a knowledge of special education law specifically, and special education in general. This study found that only 33% of all

regular administrator endorsements are required to have a knowledge of special education law and that no state requirement for a general knowledge of special education exists for 45% of the regular administrator endorsements. These percentages are low and the demand for knowledge of special education is increasing, yet it is possible that university preparation programs for school administrators are offering administration courses that address special education and special education law, regardless of a state requirement. The purpose of this study was threefold: to report university requirements for special education and special education law knowledge for administrative endorsements offered; detect differences between university perceptions of state knowledge requirements and their respective state directors of special education; and, describe how universities report knowledge of special education and special education law is acquired.

Method

Colleges and universities in the United States offering graduate degrees in school administration were identified. From this listing a random sample stratified by state population was derived. A total of 123 universities were selected and sent Survey of States: Special Education. Data from this survey are valid through the end of the 1988-89 academic year. The survey instruments were directed to the department chairs of educational administration at each institution. Four weeks after the initial mailing, follow-up questionnaires were mailed to those universities not

responding. A total of 66 usable responses were obtained, for a response rate of 54%.

The survey instrument asked a total of six questions, three of which requested information on endorsements offered, knowledge requirements for special education law and/or a general knowledge of special education, and how that knowledge is acquired. Information was requested on the following endorsements: General Administration; Principal; Instructional Supervisor; Superintendent; and Special Education Administrator. Two questions asked for yes/no responses: one asked if there was a department requirement for a special education law course, and if not whether such a course is offered as an elective; another question asked if the general school law course devotes any portion of its content to special education law, and if so, to indicate the percentage of time allocated to special education. The final question asked for comments concerning any changes the department has made or is planning to make regarding classroom instruction of special education law.

For the purpose of reporting these research results, all respondents are referred to as "universities" and the term "endorsements" applies to administrator licenses, certificates, and/orendorsements to teacher certificates.

Results

Adminitrator Endorsements Requiring a Knowledge of Special Education Law

Respondents were requested to specify which administrative endorsements, if offered, require a knowledge of special education law. Comparing data from a previous study (Valesky & Hirth, in press) and this study, agreement between state directors of special education and university chairs was determined concerning the amount of special education law knowledge required for endorsements offered. For all administrative endorsements there was a 47% discrepancy between university responses and state directors' responses. In 92% of the responses there was disagreement with the state directors of special education concerning knowledge requirements for at least one endorsement offered by the state. Due to this discrepancy the findings in this study are interpreted as university requirements rather than state requirements. Regardless of whether the state actually stipulates knowledge of special education law as a specific endorsement requirement, school administrators receive their training at universities; therefore, university perceptions of state requirements reflect actual practice and is more indicative of the actual knowledge base that is acquired by current or future educational leaders. Consequently, it is at the administrator preparation program level that the crux of the problem exists and therefore can be evaluated.

The data in Figure 1 report university endorsement offerings and requirements for knowledge of special education law. A disappointing percentage of universities indicate that they require a knowledge of special education law for administrative endorsements: 30% for general administration; 28% for principal; 22% for instructional supervisor; 28% for superintendent; and, 53% for special education administrator. According to the universities responding to this survey, only 27% of all regular administrator endorsements offered (excluding special education) require a knowledge of special education law.

Insert Figure 1 about here

How Knowledge of Special Education Law is Acquired

Figure 2 shows how knowledge of special education law is acquired for the regular administration endorsements listed in Figure 1. A total of 21 universities indicate that a knowledge of special education law is required for at least one regular administrative endorsement offered. For all of the regular administrative endorsements offered, only 7% require a course devoted exclusively to the study of special education law. The most common method reported (46%) is through a required general school law course with a special education component. The university is responsible to certify that a student possesses a knowledge of special education law for 22% of the regular administrative

endorsements. The remaining 25% of regular administrative endorsements offered have no university requirement for a knowledge of special education law.

Insert Figure 2 about here

How Knowledge of Special Education is Acquired

It is obvious that most universities do not stipulate a knowledge requirement for special education law; however, some universities do require that administrators maintain general knowledge of special education. The information in Figure 3 shows how regular administrators obtain a general knowledge of special education. According to the universities responding, a total of 43% of the regular administrative endorsements require a general knowledge of special education. Of these, 21% require an introductory special education course; 7% require a general school administration course with a special education component; and 15% of the endorsements require that the university simply certify a general knowledge of special education. The remaining 57% of endorsements offered by the universities have no requirement for a knowledge of special education.

Insert Figure 3 about here

Special Education Law Content in Administration Courses

Some universities require a special education law course as part of their school administration program or offer the course as an elective. Only 14% of the universities responding to the survey require a special education law course. A special education law course is offered as an elective by 25% of the universities. Other universities indicate that a portion of the general school law course addresses special education law; 86% fall into this category. However, over 74% of these universities devote 10% or less of their instructional time to special education law.

Summary of Results and Discussion

The most alarming finding of this study is the discrepancy between universities and state special education directors regarding endorsement requirements for a knowledge of special education law. In every state there is a lack of agreement for at least one of the endorsement categories. Universities are apparently confused about state endorsement requirements for school administrators. Due to this discrepancy, the findings in this study are interpreted as university requirements rather than state requirements. These findings indicate that the states are not clearly communicating requirements to universities that offer administrative endorsements. Likewise, universities are apparently not seeking information from the state for the purpose of updating their school administration programs.

The universities reveal that the most prevalent method for obtaining knowledge of special education law is through a general school law course. It is disturbing, however, that over 74% of the universities devote 10% or less of class content to special education. More distressing is that 14% of the universities neither require a special education law course nor devote any portion of their general school law course to special education law. Equally dismaying is that 57% of the universities have no state requirement for even a general knowledge of special education. Only 21% indicate that administrators are required to take a general or introductory course in special education. Principals and other regular administrators will have a great deal of difficulty assuming leadership and responsibility for special education programs with little or no knowledge of the legal requirements of P.L. 94-142 and significant court cases that affect implementation.

Some universities indicate that they require a special education law course (14%); however, this requirement is not consistent among universities in the same state. An elective course in special education law is offered by only 25% of the universities. And of the universities that include special education in their general school law course (86%), over 74% of them devote less than 10% of their instructional time to the subject. It does not appear that universities provide through administrator preparation programs sufficient time for students to adequately comprehend the regulatory requirements and case law

encompassing special education. Universities must recognize a need for administrators to command a knowledge of special education and special education law and take steps to revise their programs to include this component. Future administrators may encounter serious problems with special education students and their parents if they are not made aware of legal requirements.

The future direction of special and regular education is a movement toward integration of the dual systems. This movement, which has been named the Regular Education Initiative (REI), will authorize principals to control and be accountable for special education programs and resources. As this movement becomes adopted by school districts, principals must command knowledge and understanding of special education to effectively implement procedural requirements and provide appropriate educational services for handicapped students in their schools. Some districts have waivers granted in the funding of categorical programs and compliance requirements allowing them to experiment with REI recommendations. Nevertheless, handicapped students and parents have their rights guaranteed under P.L. 94-142. Therefore, principals and other regular education administrators must be prepared to deal with the problems associated with the administration of special education programming.

The results of this study indicate that universities are confused concerning endorsement requirements, and they are not adequately

preparing administrators to confront special education issues, particularly in light of the REI. Both universities and state departments of education need to actively pursue communication between themselves to ensure that school administrators are prepared to face the challenges and changes that the reform movement is producing. Providing a quality education for all students is the main purpose of the REI. Regular school administrators must command knowledge of special education and special education law if this movement toward unification of regular and special education is to be successful.

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Figure 1
Endorsement Offerings and Requirements for Special Education Law Reported by Universities

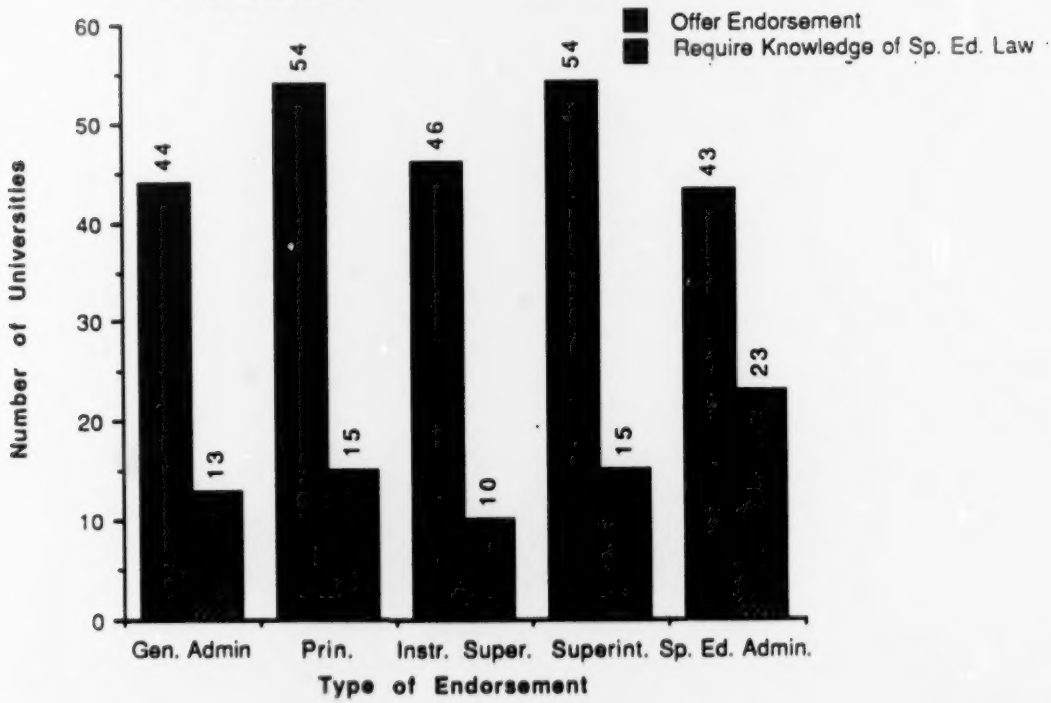

Figure 2
Methods of Acquiring Knowledge of Special Education Law for Regular Administration Endorsements

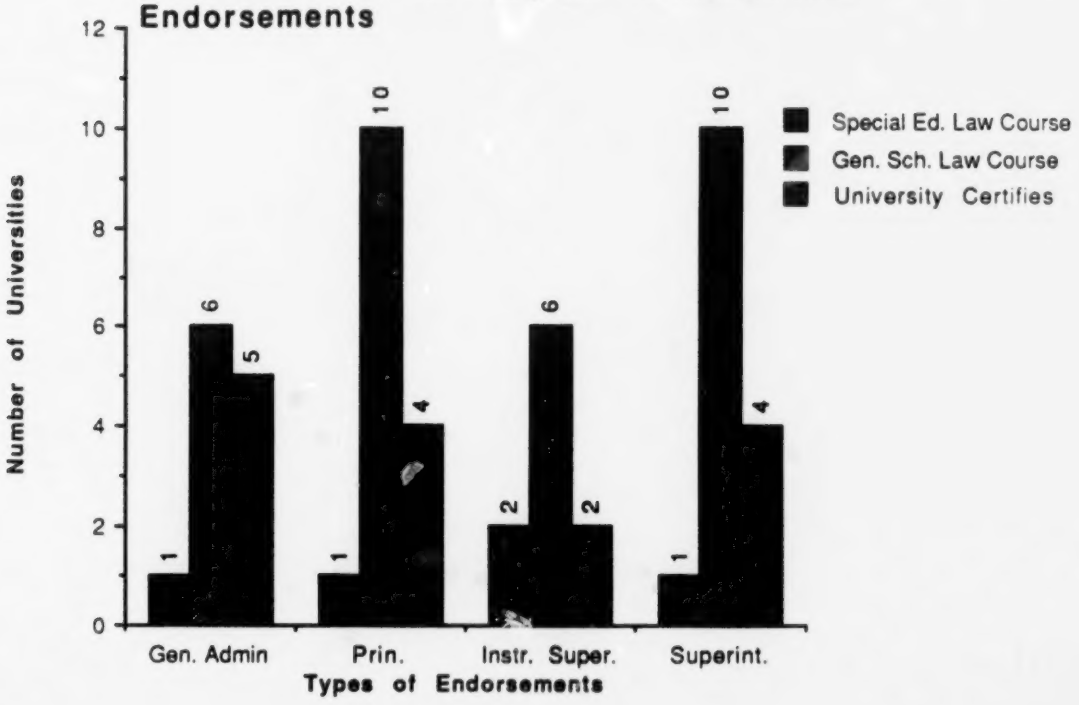

Figure 3
Methods of Acquiring General Knowledge of Special Education for Regular Administration Endorsements